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Episode 5: Access to the World: Hotels **September 8, 2021**

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Mindy Henderson...: Welcome to the Quest podcast proudly presented by the Muscular Dystrophy Association. As part of the Quest family of content. I'm your host, Mindy Henderson. Our mission with this podcast is to bring thoughtful conversation to the neuromuscular disease community and beyond, about issues affecting those with neuromuscular disease and other disabilities, and those who love them. We'd also like to acknowledge CMT Awareness, Duchenne World [00:00:30] Awareness Day, Myotonic Dystrophy Day, Periodic Paralysis Day and LGMD Day, which we join you in celebrating this September.

We are here for you to educate and inform, to demystify, to inspire and to entertain. We are here shining a light on all that makes you, you. Whether you are one of us, love someone who is, or are on another journey all together, thanks for joining. Today, [00:01:00] our conversation is a continuation of our access to the world series. With more discussion on accessible travel. Now let's get started.

I am so excited to welcome Miriam Eljas, co-founder and CEO of accessibleGO.com, a full service accessible travel platform, providing search reviews and booking of accessible hotels, cruises, transport, [00:01:30] and destinations worldwide. Miriam, I'm so excited to talk to you today because personally, I love to travel, but as a person who uses a wheelchair travel logistic are complicated for me. And I've had experiences that sometimes make me a little hesitant to step out of my comfort zone and travel to new places. So welcome to you.

Miriam Eljas: Oh, thank you so much for having me today.

Mindy Henderson...: My Pleasure. So why don't we just start at the beginning, tell [00:02:00] me how accessibleGO was created.

Miriam Eljas: So basically accessibleGO was inspired by my mother. My mother had multiple sclerosis and growing up with a parent who used a wheelchair, it just really shaped how I looked at the world. Everything we wanted to do had to be accessible, whether it was going to a friend's house or going to the mall. And you had to always bear that in mind because there were many situations where you couldn't go into a certain venue. And so I [00:02:30] always wanted to do something in this space where it would make a really big difference and help a lot of people. And I went on, did other things, but when the idea for accessibleGO emerged in a conversation, I was like, oh wow, a travel site to change how people can travel and really just revolutionize accessible travel. That would just be unbelievable. And here we are.

Mindy Henderson...: I Love it. I absolutely love it because as I'm sure you know when [00:03:00] a person with a disability travels so much hinges on those logistics and showing up to your hotel and having the accommodations be what you need and can really make or break a trip.

Miriam Eljas: I think the concern and the fear about not knowing what you're getting in to is really part of what we're trying to solve.

Mindy Henderson...: I love that. It's so good. So tell me how is accessibleGO different than other travel booking websites.

Miriam Eljas: [00:03:30] So the majority of the really popular online travel booking sites, they're trying to get you the best deal and they're giving you all these options, you go, you book and you're done, right? But with accessibleGO, it's completely different. Obviously we want to give you a good deal as well. But the main thing that we're trying to do is give you that trust and that confidence with our platform, that you know, what you're getting into and you know you're going to have a good experience. So that's really what we're all about. So with major travel sites, when you write down a special request, like a roll-in shower or grab [00:04:00] bars, whatever it is that you need, most of the time, it's not read. And with accessibleGO, that's like our bread and butter. We really want to make sure that people feel confident to book with us.

And when a booking is made in our platforms, we actually contact the hotel where you booked, and we make sure that they're going to be able to meet your requirements. And if there's any kind of a problem, we let you know immediately. And this is of course with 48 hours notice, but this is a total game changer because not only can you filter for the accessibility features that you need, but once you make your booking, [00:04:30] we're going to make sure you get it. And if there's anything that you need to be aware of, we will let you know.

Mindy Henderson...: That's incredible. Can you tell me what some of those accessibility factors are that a person can specify that you are used to working through with people and talking to the hotels about?

Miriam Eljas: So often the request might just be very basic, like roll-in shower, an ADA tub with grab bars, or they need a low floor room or a fridge for their medication. Those are [00:05:00] the most popular ones, but often people want to know

does this hotel have a pool with Lyft now, obviously that doesn't go with your room, but sometimes people just want to understand what the hotel is all about. And what I didn't explain before is that we are actively gathering accessibility data on hotels across the US. When you come to the platform, we're collecting up to 40 data points per hotel, and we've gathered data 5,000, yeah. It's a lot of work. We've gathered data on 5,000 properties. And so those data points, like I mentioned, up to 40 [00:05:30] data points, include everything from, is the lobby step free? Do they have braille menus? What are the all those details that could make or break someone's trip? But I would say the most popular ones are pretty basic, like roll-in shower, tub with grab bars and that kind of thing.

Mindy Henderson...: That's fantastic. So, like I alluded to earlier because there's so much at stake for someone with a disability who might show up and have their accommodations be maybe not what they were [00:06:00] expecting, is that one on one contact with the hotel, actually speaking to someone that really provides that level of accountability for the hotel?

Miriam Eljas: Yeah. I think when you have a company calling as opposed to an individual and also we can bring more bookings. So hotels, right now, they really want to improve their bottom line and they want to do the right thing. And so what we're trying to do is to show them we're company, this is a booking through our platform, we can bring you more bookings and please [00:06:30] make sure you treat our customer with... That you take care of their needs and hotels understand that. And they want people to have good experiences. And they're usually pretty honest that if they don't have the feature that they're supposed to have, they will tell us because they don't want someone to show up and have a bad experience.

Mindy Henderson...: Right. That's fantastic. So let's pivot just a little bit. Clearly you're doing a lot of great work at accessibleGO, but are there, just in the work that you do in the industry that you're in, [00:07:00] are there any kind of trends that you see in travel for individuals with disability, where progress is being made in terms of making travel easier for individuals with disabilities?

Miriam Eljas: So there's a few different pieces to that. So number one, the newer hotels are supposed to be more accessible because the more recent they're built, they more likely built according to the right code. So the older hotels often have issues, and sometimes they're grandfathered in, they're technically compliant with the law, [00:07:30] but they're not actually accessible. So often people say, "Oh, this hotel is ADA compliant, that doesn't mean that they're accessible." So that's a big misconception, but in terms of trends, so newer hotels usually have more options, more accessibility, and the bigger hotels also, because the number of accessible rooms is dependent on the size of the hotel. So they'll have a certain amount of roll-in showers, a certain amount of ADA tubs and so on and so forth. But I would say one of the most exciting things that we're seeing is that the time is really ripe in terms of accessibleGO [00:08:00] because there's this general trend of awareness, of travel needs.

And I think even in the last few years, we've seen that travel businesses are much more aware of accessibility than before. I wouldn't say it's perfect. Far from it there's a lot of work to be done, but in general, you'll see ad campaigns that specifically go out of their way to feature people with disabilities. And there's just this awakening that people with disabilities are going out, they are traveling, [00:08:30] they want to see places, they want to travel. And I think especially hotels are starting to recognize that.

Mindy Henderson...: That's so great. That's really good news. So is there anything then that surprised you with all the work that you've done with hotels in terms of what accommodations hotels are willing or not willing to make, or are set up or not set up to make?

Miriam Eljas: Yeah, I think one of the things that was really surprising to myself and also to our team was that there's sometimes [00:09:00] just such a lack of knowledge by the public facing staff in the hotels. So for example, sometimes we'll like I said, when a booking is complete in our platform, one of our customer service representatives, contacts the property to confirm that your needs will be met. And we've actually seen many times that these public facing staff have no idea. They just don't know. And it's like, how could you be working at a hotel and not understand, what a hearing system is or not understand, fully what a roll-in shower is. [00:09:30] So some of the chains have gotten a lot better about training, but there's a long way to go in terms of making sure that the public facing staff is fully aware of what people need depending on the type of disability they have.

Mindy Henderson...: I know that one of the other elements to your website is a community element where people can leave reviews, they can have discussions about different properties and trips and things that they've taken. Is there anything in those conversations that's been surprising [00:10:00] to you in terms of what you've been able to learn from travelers?

Miriam Eljas: I don't know if I would say so much surprising, but just that as you mentioned, the community is a big part of what we're doing. I would say, it's the combination of our accessibility data, a really unique booking experience in the community that set us apart from the other travel sites. And I think that the community where people are sharing their experiences for good or for bad is so essential. Like the other day we had a community member who was sharing [00:10:30] an experience that he had on vacation. And he was so excited because the resort he'd been to really went out of their way to make sure that not only did he have a good experience, but they wanted to learn. And I think for him, he was really surprisingly shocked in a good way that this hotel wanted to really, really make sure that they had, what else could they do?

And that's very new. I don't think you would've seen that a few years ago. Like I said, I think there's this... Yeah. It's like a trend. I wouldn't say obviously every hotel is like that because [00:11:00] obviously unfortunately there are some bad experiences and that's why we need reviews, because the reviews give the community perspective on yes, the hotel may tell us that they have certain accessibility features, but the review will either confirm or conflict with what the

hotel claims to have. So reviews, I think are such an important part of our platform that you can see what it's really like to experience a stay at a specific property. So I think in terms of surprises, I think in general surprises have been the positivity because usually people, when [00:11:30] they have a disability, they're very afraid to have a bad experience and rightfully so because there've been many incidents where hotels were ill prepared, misrepresented information. And I think, I would say, not to be like a cheerleader, but things are really on the up and up in terms of awareness and a desire to really improve.

Mindy Henderson...: I think that's fantastic to hear and it really is encouraging if that's the majority of what you're seeing [00:12:00] coming through your website, that's exciting.

Miriam Eljas: Sure. And we definitely have reviews that are negative. I'm not going to say that there aren't [crosstalk 00:12:07] of course some negative experiences out there, but then the whole purpose is that when somebody unfortunately has a bad experience, whether or not they're booked with us, we want them to share that with the community. So number one, people know when they're booking what their options are and also everybody has different accessibility needs. So somebody might be... What doesn't work for one person might work for another. So a hotel that may not be completely [00:12:30] accessible, but is technically ADA compliant. Someone might be able to stay there where someone else couldn't, it just depends on what they need.

Mindy Henderson...: Absolutely. And you read my mind. And there are all kinds of disabilities, of course, as well. There are mobility issues. There are people who are visually or hearing impaired,, all kinds of things for hotels to accommodate and they made you better in one area than others of course.

Miriam Eljas: Sure, sure. It's interesting [00:13:00] to see also, especially after COVID, not that COVID is over, but people are starting to travel again. And I think that hotels really, especially because they were hit very hard, they are really looking to not only improve their bottom line, but to do the right thing. And we're definitely seeing that. We're having a lot of hotel management companies reaching out to us to get their accessibility data on our platform. And that's exciting. It's really exciting, but we're continuing to make a lot of progress in terms of covering more and more cities for accessibility information.

Mindy Henderson...: [00:13:30] Definitely. So for individuals with maybe mobility disabilities, like those with neuromuscular disease who may be listening in your experience, are there places, cities that you've found to be the best of the best in terms of destinations for people with disabilities?

Miriam Eljas: That's a great question. I think what we've seen at least with accessibleGO is that most of the bookings are actually for smaller cities, in that people aren't looking for these big [00:14:00] splashy vacations in huge cities right now, they're looking to visit their friends and family, they're going on regional trips and they're staying at hotels because the hotels are often the anchor for the trip. But I would say in terms of places that are getting it right. I wouldn't say that there's one specific city, but I would say again, newer cities have more hotels that are built more recently are more likely to have a better experience.

So older cities often have more accessibility problems because a lot of their infrastructure [00:14:30] was built when accessibility wasn't a top of mind.

Mindy Henderson...: Right. And one of the things also that I don't think we've mentioned yet is in addition to the hotels and all of the assistance that you give with booking hotels and specific accessibility issues is, finding destinations and things to do in the cities that are particularly accessible, right?

Miriam Eljas: Yeah, exactly. So one of the first things we did when we launched our platform was we [00:15:00] mapped out the top 30 cities in America. And so for example, if you're looking for the top 10 things to do in Orlando or a 48 hour itinerary for San Diego, we have all kinds of really exciting content about things to do. And we also created an initial level of resources for each of those 30 cities. So if you are stuck in let's say on a Houston and your wheelchair broke, or you want to go on a tour where they have accessibility in mind front and center, [00:15:30] we have all kinds of resources for those top 30 cities. Again, this is before we had launched the booking capability. So now we see that a lot of the travel patterns are for the smaller cities, but we do have all kinds of exciting fun content. Yeah.

Mindy Henderson...: That's actually not what I thought you would've said. So that's really interesting.

Miriam Eljas: Yeah. People use us to, their regular trip to visit their sister in Los Angeles or to go to their grandchildren's graduation or for a family road trip, not necessarily [00:16:00] like two weeks in Orlando at Disney world and that kind of thing.

Mindy Henderson...: Right. Interesting. Okay. So, obviously there are a lot of other components to travel. We're talking mainly about hotels, but there's ground travel when you've got mobility issues. There's air travel, which is a whole other can of worms that we're going to talk about in another part of this episode, there's cruises and all sorts of things. So what sort of [00:16:30] tips or advice would you give travelers with disabilities around making travel as successful as possible?

Miriam Eljas: So I think planning is essential and I think everybody knows that because it's obvious, but you just can't leave a lot of things to chance because depending on the city you're going to, you don't know what kind of infrastructure they have and how resources are available. So AccessibleGO, our vision is to cover each aspect of the travel journey from the ground transportation, to the flight, to the hotel, to the attraction, [00:17:00] whatnot. But at the moment our focus is on hotels. And so when it comes to ground transportation, we have all kinds of listings just as an example, because ground transportation's one of the biggest problems people talk about.

We do have all kinds a listing for those top 30 cities about resources for your trip. But I would say that not leaving things to chance and calling places in advance and making sure that your specific needs will be met is so essential because you don't want to be stuck. And it's always good to have a plan [00:17:30] B. That that's really important because you just don't know what's going to happen. You don't want some taxi company taking too long to get to you and having no other option.

Mindy Henderson...: Great point. Are there things that you're aware of or that you would suggest that individuals can do to help perpetuate progress in the travel industry and advocate for better and better accessibility in lodging let's say?

Miriam Eljas: Definitely. I think we talked about earlier about the review. [00:18:00] I think that is so essential because when you have a bad experience, when you have staff that are not properly trained, when you go to use, let's say a roll-in shower and things in the bathroom are not situated in the right places, so you can't bathe properly, we need to document it in a review. And these reviews, as we get more and more reviews in our platform, they're going to be so powerful because at the end of the day hotels, they want to do a good job.

They want to keep their guests happy. And sometimes it's not necessarily from a bad place, [00:18:30] they just simply don't know, aren't aware not enough people complain. And I think the problem is people have had bad experiences and they've been like, "Oh, this is just how it is." And the truth is it's not how it has to be, and it can be different. And by speaking up and writing reviews and sharing it with the community and participating, for example like in our forum, if somebody say, "Can you recommend a hotel for me in Pigeon Forge or wherever?" And people from the community share their good and bad experiences, that's really, I think it's the power [00:19:00] of the community that makes travel businesses want to do the right thing.

Mindy Henderson...: Right. And so I know that your company is what, three or four years old now, is that about right?

Miriam Eljas: Yeah. Basically in the beginning of the company, we were building a lot of the content and the infrastructure to get the platform live because simply to offer the booking capability and the rich data that we've collected on the hotels, it took us a lot of time to create that infrastructure for our platform. And so we [00:19:30] really got going probably right before COVID.

Mindy Henderson...: Yeah. And it seems like you've made amazing progress in that short amount of time with everything that you've been able to put in place. What else is on the horizon for you? What additional problems would you like to solve for travelers?

Miriam Eljas: So we talked about grand transportation and attractions. I think these are some of the key parts of the trip where people, we want to give travelers who have a disability, the confidence and the trust to know that they're going to have a good experience. [00:20:00] And so by offering these additional travel products on the platform where they can search by accessibility requirements, where they can see reviews by fellow travelers, that is so exciting to us, to be able to make that difference and to make people feel more comfortable when they travel, it's a total game changer and for us it's tremendously exciting. And so I would say in terms of next steps, adding those additional features to the platform and really dramatically increasing the size of our community as travel starts to return, [00:20:30] that's what's next for us.

Mindy Henderson...: That's all so fantastic. And like I said, I am a traveler at heart. I haven't done nearly as much of it as I would like to do for all of the reasons that we're talking

about today. There's so much to consider, but I think people like yourselves who are working hard to solve those problems is fantastic. And I would echo your sentiments about people just sharing their experiences [00:21:00] and making things known. I think you're right. I think just using our voices is what's going to help make things better. And I think it's exciting that the trends that we're seeing already. Any last advice or thoughts that you want to share with people as we close out?

Miriam Eljas:

Sure. I think there are a couple things. So first of all, I think for us at accessibleGO, what makes what we're doing so compelling and exciting and meaningful is just that we can really change [00:21:30] travel for people with disabilities and take that fear and change it into excitement about a trip instead of being worried that you're not going to get what you booked or that you're going to have a bad experience. And for us, that's just, it's very powerful to be able to have that kind of an impact. Because trips really has a lasting feeling even after you've returned home. It's these trips that really stay in your mind and can have such an effect on your sense of wellbeing. And I think that's really important, [00:22:00] but I think also in terms of the community, it's like, I was saying before, I think in the past, people just put up with situations because as in previous times it was just, that's how it was you showed up at property, your room was given to the wrong person.

You didn't get your roll-in shower, tough luck. That's just how it is. But now it's like, no, you want to share it on, in our forum you want to write a review share on social media and the more people that show that people with disabilities are traveling and [00:22:30] everybody, no matter what their personal situation is, should have a positive travel experience. And I think by showing the volume of people who have these needs, so that, for example, when you show up at a property and your room is given to the wrong person, oftentimes the hotel staff thinks, "Oh, maybe it's not really going to get used." And so when people speak up, the more people that speak up and share their experiences, it's definitely going to change things.

Mindy Henderson...:

Definitely. Such good advice and exciting things that it sounds like [00:23:00] not only are you doing, but are coming. So thank you Miriam, so much for your time and your expertise and for all that you're doing to help advocate for these good experiences.

Miriam Eljas:

Thank you. It was wonderful to be on the podcast today and thanks for the opportunity to share about accessibleGO.

Mindy Henderson...:

You're so welcome, thank you. Thank you for listening. For more information about the guests you heard from today, go check them out at mda.org/podcast and to learn more about the Muscular Dystrophy Association, the services we provide, how you can get involved and to subscribe to Quest magazine or to Quest newsletter, please go to mda.org/quest. If you enjoyed this episode, we'd be grateful if you'd leave a review, go ahead and hit that subscribe button so we can keep bringing you great content and maybe share it with a friend or two. Thanks everyone, until next [00:24:00] time go be the light we all need in this world.